

Construction begins next month

Sarah AuBuchon, News Democrat Journal

As public officials broke ground on the new section of Route 21 from Lake Lorraine to Hayden Road Monday morning, they vowed to keep fighting to complete the highway further south.

"It's a project in the making," state Sen. Kevin Engler, R-Farmington, said. "We need to make sure we keep the pressure on in Jefferson City to continue this highway all the way to De Soto."

Construction on the \$25.1 million four-lane divided highway will begin next month, with the bid awarded to Fred Weber Inc.

Missouri Department of Transportation Engineer Judy Wagner said the next new section of Route 21 is expected to be complete in August 2009.

"This is the gap project," she said. "When it is finished, it will be a leg connecting St. Louis County to Route B (at the north end of Hillsboro.)"

Funding for the new 3.5-mile section, which includes a new interchange at Old Route 21 at Lake Lorraine, comes from Amendment 3 funds passed in November 2005, Wagner said.

The project is the last leg of the highway that has funding, although the East-West Gateway Council of Governments has approved plans to extend the highway south of Hillsboro. As funding becomes available, those segments will be built.

"We want to keep this project going," state Rep. Joe Fallert, D-Ste Genevieve, said. "This project is going to save lives."

State Rep. Belinda Harris, D-Hillsboro, said 16,000 people use Route 21 to commute to work from Jefferson County each day.

"This will no longer be called 'Blood Alley,'" she said. "Old 21 will become a scenic route, not a major artery."

Hillsboro Mayor Frank Roland Jr., whose wife Evelyn was killed on Old Route 21 more than 10 years ago, and U.S. Rep. Russ Carnahan, D-St. Louis, agreed safety was one of the most important issues for building the new highway.

"This area is going to grow and be safe," Carnahan said. "We want more highways, but fewer funerals in Jefferson County. For those who aren't here, we want to remember them and vow to keep the roads safe."

Jefferson County Presiding Commissioner Chuck Banks pledged to continue to fight for funding through East-West Gateway and other entities to make more expansion possible and bring economic growth to the county.

"This road is the lifeblood for Jefferson County," he said. "We need to go from Hillsboro to De Soto into Washington and Iron counties."

Fred Weber Inc. is also winding up construction on the stretch of road from Route A to Lake Lorraine. The \$14.7 million project, also funded through Amendment 3, started last year and is expected to open to traffic by fall.

The first section of the divided Route 21 was built in Jefferson County in mid 1980s, Wagner said.

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